DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 377 994 RC 019 837

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TITLE	LEarning Visions: A Rural Dropout Prevention Model.
SPONS AGENCY	Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	24 Oct 94
NOTE	10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Center for Rural Education and Small Schools Conference (16th, Manhattan, KS, October 24-25, 1994).
PUB TYPE	Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Ancillary School Services; Attendance; Counseling Services; County Programs; Demonstration Programs; *Dropout Prevention; Dropout Programs; Economically Disadvantaged; Elementary Secondary Education; *High Risk Students; Instructional Innovation; *Integrated Services; *Parent Participation; Parent School Relationship; *Rural Education; Social Services; Tutoring
IDENTIFIERS	Jackson County School District TN

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a K-12 intervention program for educationally at-risk youth in Jackson County, Tennessee. The LEarning VISIONS (LV) program involves teachers, administrators, parents, business leaders, and higher-education personnel in an effort to integrate a variety of long-term intervention strategies while respecting the rural context and local values. The program has six major components: attendance monitoring and support, which includes regular communication with families; academic assistance and innovation involving extra teaching assistants and curriculum change; integrated social services for families; parental education and involvement with particular attention given to teenage parents; increased counseling services for both students and faculty; and career awareness and guidance activities including National Diffusion Network materials. Emphasis has been on institutionalizing practices that can be sustained with local resources; many program components are now accepted as the norm and are funded at least in part through other than federal grant sources. Since the beginning of the program 3 years ago, attendance and test scores are up, more parents are interacting with the schools, the school system has a more positive image in the community, and the schools appear to be more academically focused. (RAH)

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LEarning Visions
A Rural Dropout Prevention Model

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16th Annual Rural and Small Schools Conference

Kansas State University

October 24, 1994

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LEarning VISIONS

A Rural Dropout Prevention Model

We have a VISION of the children of Jackson County LEARNING the knowledges, skills and attitudes necessary to complete high school and become adults who can EARN a living for themselves and their families.

LEarning VISIONS is a partnership project between the Jackson County (TN) schools, Tennessee Technological University, Visions Five Group (a non-profit economic development corporation), and businesses in Jackson County. Jackson County is a rural community distant from urban centers--Nashville (80 miles), Knoxville (125 miles), and Chattanooga (125 miles). The county is beautiful with rolling wooded hills, scenic rivers, and a large man-made lake. The beauty often masks the economic and educational disadvantagedness of the populace. The county has a low per capita income (less than $10,000), low educational level (over half adults 25 and over are not high school graduates), and a limited economic base. More than half of the students qualify for free or reduced price lunch.

LEarning VISIONS (LV) is a K-12 intervention program for educationally at-risk Jackson County youth. Designed by a team of teachers, administrators, parents, business leaders, and higher educators, the project attempted to respect the rural context and local values of the community while integrating a variety of long-term intervention strategies. LV has six major strands: attendance monitoring and support; academic assistance and innovation; integrated social services for families; parental education/involvement; counseling services; and career awareness/guidance. The components of each and a description of some of the successes follow.

*<u>Attendance monitoring and support</u>. Daily telephone contact is made with the family of each student absent. The call establishes the reason for the absence, the anticipated date of return to school, any assistance which the family needs in order to return the child to school, and any school

materials which the child needs during the absence. The tone of the call is positive and supportive. "What can LEarning VISIONS do to help you get your child back to school?" This assistance may be homework assignments, clothes, access to medical services, or merely encouragement. Journal entries of all contacts are maintained. When patterns of absenteeism are discovered, home visits seek to determine the factors contributing to absenteeism. If the family needs assistance, LV refers them to the appropriate social service or health agency or, if deemed necessary, attempts to provide emergency services. Particular success has been noted among families with histories of chronic absenteeism. Younger children of these families are now attending school regularly even though older children may continue to be problems or have dropped out.

When the cause of absenteeism is determined to be truancy, a Truancy Board meets and may place the student on probation, or, if results are not positive, parents may face legal action. In the three years of the project, the juvenile judge as gone from reluctantly hearing truancy cases, to placing a few children in residential centers for truancy, to requesting that the LV director appear at all juvenile hearings as a friend of the court.

Beyond the attendance data, the telephone calls have established linkages into the home of every child in the system. The LV Director is introduced at the Rotary Club as "This is the woman who calls you every time your child misses school!" In the early days, parents would often lie for their truant children, particularly when the parents were unaware that the child was out of school. Within a few weeks of initiating the project, students ceased to miss school except with the knowledge of their parents. That put the responsibility for attendance on the parents where it rightfully belongs. However, the "high touch", positive support of the calls has changed the image of the school system to one of helpmate rather than villain in all but the most serious situations. Jackson County is one of the few school systems in the state which already exceeds Tennessee's Education 2000 goals for attendance.

*Academic assistance and innovation. Students needing academic assistance receive individual and/or small group tutoring from a teaching assistant. The teaching (not teacher) assistants, one per school, work directly with students to overcome academic difficulties. In the lower grades, the assistants move from classroom to classroom, working with students identified by teachers. In the middle school, the assistant has a classroom equipped with some computer support where teachers may send students or students may request to go. At the high school, the assistant operates the computer learning laboratory where students use curriculum software for remediation or enrichment, use electronic information sources, or word process assignments. During the first year, the teaching assistant at the high school was able to tutor three senior boys through Economics, the difference between graduation and dropping out.

Teachers provide academic assistance before and after school through LV, extended contracts, or as volunteers. The ready availability of assistance meets the needs of students who have been absent, who failed to comprehend a key concept, or slower students who need on-going support. The popularity of the teacher-provided academic assistance is such that it now occurs most days in every school. Jackson County was just cited as one of the five school systems in the state with the greatest student achievement gains for the past school year.

Academic innovation has included revamping the mathematics curriculum K-12 with the adoption of Saxon texts and the addition of mathematics for technology. Workshops in cooperative learning and whole language have been provided. An interactive television network allows science classes to have guest lecturers from TTU and for teachers at the high school to interact conveniently with TTU faculty and other secondary teachers. An NDN study skills program and a higher order thinking skills program have been implemented. Computers and software have been purchased and are in daily use. Summer enrichment programming has been provided. A high school/college English course is offered at 7:00am over interactive television.

While Jackson County has had an effective adult education program for a number of years, LV has taken a lead in expanding that program to include an adult high school program. This program allows adults to complete the specific credits they lack and to receive a regular high school diploma rather than the GED certificate. The adult high school program has enabled LV to assist several dropouts in completing high school and to place several teenage mothers who could/would not return to the high school.

*Integrated social services for families. As is common in many rural communities, prior to LEarning VISIONS there was little communication and almost no cooperation between the school system and those social service agencies located in the county. Some agencies have regional offices in another county and rarely are visible in Jackson County. One major duty of the Director of LEarning Visions has been to create a network of information and contacts so that families and children needing services can be referred to appropriate agencies quickly and effectively. In many cases, the LV Director has served as advocate for families seeking services. This has perhaps been one of the most successful components of the project.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) now routinely refers families in need to the Family Resource Center and requires attendance at the parenting classes for continued support. Teachers and administrators check with LV before contacting DHS for intervention.

One recent case with a kindergarten child describes how the system works: The child was having severe urinary tract problems; the teacher sents a series of notes home to suggest medical attention and request information with no response; suspecting child abuse the teacher discussed with the counselor referring the case to DHS; the LV director was asked if there was any information which the school did not have; LV refered to a similar problem with an older sibling three years ago in which it was determined that the mother could not read and a home visit determined that the older child was sleeping with the younger child who wet the bed because of medical problems; LV conducted another home visit to again assist the mother in seeking medical

attention for the younger child. The child is now functioning well--socially and academically.

A quiet success is the LV community clothing (and household goods) closet. In addition to a room of used clothing contributed by persons in the community, LV has established linkages with clothing stores which will provide new clothing (particularly shoes and coats) on request. When homes burn, LV assists families in acquiring furniture and other household items.

The frequency of cases in which immediate medical knowledge was needed led the school system to employ a school nurse last school year. She works individually with students and their families regarding lice, communicable diseases, nutrition, hygiene, and health screening. She serves as a resource to teachers providing classroom presentations on health issues included in the curriculum.

*Parental education/involvement. In a county where two-thirds of the adults have not completed high school, many parents are intimidated by schools and educators. Overcoming these cultural barriers between schools and families has been an important role for LV. The attendance monitoring telephone calls, happy notes from teachers, newsletters from schools and LV, open houses for entering students and their families at each school, home visits, adult education classes, and parenting classes are among the strategies used to open the school system to parents.

LV has taken a particular interest in teenage parents. For years the community had chosen to ignore the teenage pregnancy problem and encouraged pregnant teens to drop out of school. The consequences were more young mothers and children on welfare, children entering school with physical and/or learning delays, and a high dropout rate. LV has taken a proactive approach through group counseling of pregnant teens, encouragement to remain in school with minimum homebound enrollment, assisting with access to prenatal care, and locating child care so the mother can attend school. While the incidence of teenage pregnancy has not decreased, the negative impacts on the mothers' educational and economic futures have diminished. Research is underway

through case studies to attempt to design a pregnancy prevention program for the county.

*Increased counseling services. The project has taken the school system from two counselors serving four schools to three counselors (K-4, 5-8, 9-12) plus contracted services of private licensed counselors. The three full-time counselors are able to conduct individual and small group sessions and work closely with students and parents in preventive measures. While the grant provided only short-term support for the additional position, its value was demonstrated to the extent that the position is now fully funded through the regular budget.

The power of contracted services has been particularly interesting to watch. Perhaps because the part-time licensed counselor at the high school and middle school was from outside the county, students sought her out to discuss their emotional problems. She was particularly effective with potential suicides. After her contract ended, she returned to the high school as a volunteer on more than one occasion of violent deaths among the student body. This fall another contract counselor provided grief intervention training to the entire faculty.

Career awareness/guidance. Jackson County students had a poor grasp of the career opportunities available if they continued their education and of the working conditions and rewards of various careers. The NDN Project Discovery curriculum was implemented first by teachers and then by a part-time career education consultant. LV was fortunate to discover an unemployed industrial arts teacher who was willing to work part-time at the middle school in career exploration. He is now a full-time employee serving as career counselor for the two-path high school program, teaching career exploration at the middle school and high school, and helping direct the vocational program.

LV has linked with the Cumberland Career Equity Center at TTU. The Center coordinator regularly conducts classroom presentations on goal setting, decision making, and non-traditional careers. In November, all Jackson County seventh grade students will spend a day on the university campus

attending sessions provided by the various academic departments, particularly in science and engineering. Two Jackson County High School females participate in the Center's residential career camp during the summer and two weekends during the academic year.

Discussion

The project integrates a variety of strategies, some of which had already been successfully initiated on a limited basis in the system, replication of selected validated projects from the National Diffusion Network, and some new strategies designed to supplement and complement the others in culturally sensitive ways. Given the economic distress of the county and the community acceptance of not completing high school, the project was based on the premise that all students in Jackson County are potentially at-risk. This premise provides limited opportunity for comparisons of aggregate data on students served versus not served but allows project staff maximum flexibility in responding to emerging needs of students and families. As the LV Director points out, "The success of the project is in the little stories of children who made good choices."

Emphasis has been on institutionalizing practices that can be sustained with local resources beyond the period of external funding. As the project enters its fourth and final year, many of the program components are accepted as the norm and are funded at least in part through sources other than the federal grant. The local school budget is fully supporting the added guidance counselor, the school nurse, and the career counselor. A state-funded Family Resource Center is coordinating social service functions and contracting for the private counselors. The curricular innovations are in place with teachers trained and sufficient materials available with some annual replacement. Open houses, newsletters, and happy notes are routine activities. The three pieces of LV most at jeopardy at the end of the federal funding cycle are the director's position, the four teaching assistants, and the half-time attendance monitor. The goal for this year is to attempt to convince the new superintendent, the board of education, and the county commission that these

positions are investments worthy of sustained funding with local and state funds.

Has the program solved the dropout problem in Jackson County? The answer is NO! The official dropout records reveal that 27 students dropped out last year. However, 7 of those students are back in school today (either high school or adult high school) because LV kept working with them over the summer and encouraging them to continue their education. On the positive side of the ledger, attendance and test scores are up; more parents are interacting with the schools; the school system has a more positive image in the community; and the schools appear to be more academically focused than three years ago. There is no quick fix to poverty, apathy, and low literacy levels. Solutions are complex, time-consuming, risky, expensive, and energy-draining. America's rural youth are worth those kinds of investments.

LEarning VISIONS is funded by the US Department of Education as a Dropout Prevention Demonstration Project, CFDA 84.201C.